

Italy: holy smoke! Pope swerves off track for Marlboro

Around a billion people in the world are Catholics. Large numbers are found in South America, and in developing countries in other parts of the world. So as with other important issues, if the Pope and other senior officials of the catholic church were to take a strong lead on tobacco, it would deal a serious blow to the big tobacco companies, hitting them hardest in some of the very places where they are recruiting vast numbers of new smokers, including some of the fastest growing youth populations in the world.

Two events around the end of last year show that if the Catholic church develops a serious policy on smoking, Philip Morris, at least, will not take it lying down. In late December, as Catholics the world over tune in more attentively to the Christmas spirit, and perhaps pay more heed to the teachings of the church (the Pope's Christmas message is one the world's most widely broadcast events), an interesting news item was reported worldwide.

First, a clear signal was given by the Vatican, the mini-state set in the heart of Rome, capital of Italy, which is home to the Pope and headquarters of the Catholic church, that it may be

considering a leading role in the world campaign against smoking. An article in an authoritative Catholic publication, the Jesuit review *Civiltà Cattolica*, which observers say would have been written with the clear knowledge and endorsement of the Pope's most senior aides, declared that smokers cannot damage their own health and that of others "without moral responsibility". Whereas the most striking theme of the Pope's work has been respect for human life, the Catholic church as a body had not focused previously on the scientific evidence on smoking and disease. But the article, by Father Giuseppe De Rosa, openly entered the scientific arena, specifically mentioning the dangers to unborn children, with effects lasting throughout their lives. It even acknowledged addiction, when referring to some women being unable to stop smoking even when pregnant, in which case, said Father De Rosa, the addiction lessened their moral responsibility.

While stopping short of classifying smoking as a sin, the article nevertheless described it as "not neutral either in social or indeed moral terms". Father De Rosa has clearly pushed Catholic thinking well beyond past church pronouncements, which said only that the virtue of temperance should dispose Catholics to avoid every

kind of "excess", with tobacco being mentioned along with food, alcohol and "medicines", presumably meaning drugs. The article came just as Italy was preparing for the introduction of the new law banning smoking in public places, a development as ground breaking as the lead taken by another European Catholic country, Ireland, just nine months earlier.

The second event received far more publicity around the world. In mid January, the Marlboro Formula One motor racing team was granted an audience with the Pope, who was presented with a magnificent fifth scale model of a Marlboro emblazoned car by the team's top driver, Michael Schumacher. The Pope paid tribute to the spirit and enthusiasm of the Marlboro Ferrari team, and endorsed the importance of sport in society, stressing the role of sport in education, "especially for the young generation", the very people Marlboro's marketing men would hate to see discouraged from smoking, especially by the Pope.

The timetable of the request for the audience with the Pope, and the strings pulled to secure it, are unknown. Normally such a privilege is the result of protracted negotiations and nimble footwork on the dance floor of diplomatic protocol, but whenever it was begun, the ensuing event cannot be a mere coincidence. What is more important is whether the move signalled by Father De Rosa's article is followed through, to the certain advantage of the health of some of the world's most disadvantaged people, or whether, yet again, it will just be business as usual for the tobacco industry.



Pictures of the Marlboro Formula One motor racing team's audience with the Pope, like this one from a Belgian newspaper, were carried all over the world by news media. *De Standaard*.

Canada: point of sale win—again

The story so far: Rothmans Benson & Hedges (RBH), Canadian subsidiary of BAT, took legal action in 2002 to try to get back the "power wall" displays of cigarette packs that had just been banned in the province of Saskatchewan. But luckily, Saskatchewan had an excellent health minister, who said, "Our legislation must be working if this tobacco company is suing us... [we] will defend the Tobacco Control Act from this attack" (Canada: demolishing the power walls. *Tobacco Control* 2003;12: 7-8). At last, that vigorous defence has paid off.

The RBH action was initially dismissed, but the company appealed on the basis that the province's law conflicted with federal law. In September 2003, the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal reversed the earlier judgement, so declaring inoperative the provision



A "power wall" display of cigarettes, used as a marketing ploy in Canada.

prohibiting the visible display of tobacco products. The government of Saskatchewan then appealed to the county's top court, the Supreme Court of Canada. Supporting Saskatchewan was the federal government and five other provinces, as well as national health organisations working against tobacco's big diseases—cancer, stroke, heart and lung disease, and the medical association.

The appeal hearing took place on 19 January this year, which happened to be "Weedless Wednesday" in Ontario's National Non-Smoking Week, whose theme was 'Out of sight – Out of mind', a reference to a retail display ban being promoted by Ontario health groups. Students and health advocates were staging a protest in front of the Supreme Court even as the nine judges hearing the case asked to hear from RBH, and questioned its lawyers. The judges did not seem pleased with the answers they got, and took only a 15 minute recess before returning to say it would not be necessary to hear from the appellant, or from other parties who might want to join the suit. They had unanimously decided that the appeal

was allowed. The entire procedure had taken only 90 minutes—usually Supreme Court decisions take around six months.

So the law banning point of sale displays in any premises accessible to children under 18 is once again in force in Saskatchewan. Other provinces are also free to enact their own bans. Manitoba and Nunavut, the large, mainly Inuit populated northern territory, which already have similar laws, delayed their implementation pending the outcome of the Saskatchewan case, so are expected to put them into practice. There is now a real chance that before too long, the whole of Canada will be free of major cigarette pack displays.

UK: progress markers? A piece of cake

Spotted at a health related press launch in Westminster recently was Sir George Young, a member of parliament who in 1981 suffered an "acute myocalifano infarction". As experienced tobacco control advocates will know, this sudden

cutting-off of political power often afflicts good health ministers who take a strong line on tobacco. It is named after an early victim, US health secretary Joe Califano, who was sacked amid a fury of tobacco industry outrage after making clear to a delighted world conference on tobacco and health in 1979 that he meant business on tobacco control.

Sir George's own event struck soon after he had secured permission from his cabinet level boss to initiate legislation if the tobacco companies, with which he had been forced into fruitless "voluntary agreement" negotiations, did not agree significant reductions on promotion. The night he was moved to a much less important post in the department of the environment, when asked what his new responsibilities were, a disgruntled Sir George replied, "I seem to be in charge of the government car pool". Nowadays in opposition, but still manifestly concerned about preventive health measures, Sir George surveyed the changes over the near quarter century since he left the health department.

The UK, while slow on taking action on smoking in public places, has seen a rate of decline of lung cancer mortality, that crude but most direct of markers, second only to Finland. But Sir George recalled another crude marker seen along the way, 10 years ago, when he attended the 80th birthday party of his former constituent Dr Keith Ball, for many years chairman of Action on Smoking and Health.

A magnificent birthday cake was brought in, and Dr Ball prepared himself to attempt the heroic feat of blowing out all the candles. But in a large room full of friends and former colleagues, not a single guest had a match or lighter. Luckily, said Sir George, someone had the presence of mind to run to a nearby hospital ward to beg one from a porter or nurse, though he hopes that not even they will be able to produce one at Dr Ball's 90th, later this year.